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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 000128

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENCY MIDDLE EAST ADVISOR ON SYRIA/LEBANON  
STRATEGY, UPCOMING GOURDAULT-MONTAGNE VISIT TO WASHINGTON

REF: A. PARIS 105

[1](#)B. PARIS 40

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Presidential Middle East/Americas advisor Dominique Boche previewed the upcoming visit of Presidential Diplomatic Advisor Gourdauld-Montagne to Washington, stressing the need to reassess U.S.-GoF efforts to pressure Damascus, without suggesting that such pressure be eased. Boche described U.S.-GoF efforts on Syria/Lebanon as hamstrung by the need to sustain international consensus, in the face of growing Lebanese sentiment that Syria can destabilize Lebanon with impunity. Boche questioned the depth of international support for U.S.-French efforts to pressure Syria, and expressed concern that, barring sudden breakthroughs by UNIIIC, resorting to further UN action would expose our limitations. Boche expressed support for U.S. thinking on UNIFIL renewal, and suggested that France will press the GoL to adopt a supportive position. Boche voiced caution on recent statements by former Syrian VP Khaddam, which, while adding momentum to UNIIIC efforts, had raised unfounded suspicions of French backing. Boche dismissed Khaddam as a potential alternative to Bashar al-Asad and described the former Syrian VP as directly responsible for French losses in Lebanon. Boche also expressed concern that other Arab governments, namely Saudi Arabia, view Khaddam as a Sunni alternative to Bashar, a point of vivid speculation among local Lebanese journalists. Boche voiced caution on moving forward to seek replacement of Lebanese President Lahoud, concluding that Lahoud's likely demand for immunity in exchange for stepping down remained a non-starter for the GoF. Boche echoed U.S. concerns on a possible GOL compromise to bring Hizballah back into the cabinet by offering it exemption from UNSCR 1559, and concluded that the GOL should remain firm and negotiate from a position of strength, given Hizballah's strong desire to stay in the government. End summary.

#### NEED TO REASSESS POLICIES

[1](#)2. (C) During a January 6 meeting with Pol M/C and poloff, Presidential Middle East/Americas Advisor Dominique Boche stressed that the January 13 Washington visit by Diplomatic Advisor Gourdauld-Montagne would be an opportunity to reassess U.S.-GoF efforts to pressure Syria, despite renewed momentum generated by former VP Khaddam's anti-SARG public statements. Boche clarified that he was not suggesting that the U.S. and France ease pressure on Damascus, but stressed the needed to look realistically at the difficult situation which we were in. In Boche's view, U.S.-French efforts to pressure Syria faced a difficult dilemma: our efforts to preserve unanimity had resulted in UNSCR's which were weak (as seen in UNSCR 1644) and viewed as victories by the SARG, while stronger measures would lose Arab support and break international consensus, therefore depriving our actions of legitimacy. The end result, in Boche's view, was increasing sentiment in Lebanon that the SARG was acting with impunity, and could assassinate opponents and use proxies in Lebanon to launch rocket attacks against Israel and bring the cabinet to a standstill, while the international community "lacked resolve" to stop it.

[1](#)3. (C) Boche added that the international community did not support the U.S. and France completely on Syria/Lebanon, which limited our maneuvering room and contributed to SARG sentiment of impunity. In Boche's view, Egyptian President Mubarak, while reaffirming a firm approach during his January 4 meeting with Chirac, remains focused on "saving the head" of Bashar al-Asad. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, advocated a tougher approach more in line with the GoF view. Asked about wavering German support for UNIIIC Chief Mehlis, Boche (protect) opined that the Merkel government's lack of enthusiasm for UNIIIC had contributed to Mehlis' departure. Boche added that the Merkel government had been marked by its first foreign policy crisis, the kidnapping of a German archeologist in Iraq, and wondered openly whether her release was linked to Berlin's near-simultaneous liberation of a Hizballah terrorist.

FURTHER UN ACTION: PRST, UNIFIL

14. (C) Boche cautioned that unless UNIIIC produced "spectacular" results soon, further UNSC action against Syria would expose the limitations of our approach and further boost Syrian confidence. He cited as an example a possible PRST endorsing the latest Larsen report, which Boche characterized as a "mediocre" response at best. On renewal of UNIFIL later this month, Boche described the GoF as supportive of U.S. proposals to stress UNIFIL's interim nature, and call for the GOL to fully deploy in the south. The GoF would encourage the GOL to assist the debate on UNIFIL by taking concrete measures to increase its presence in the South, for which there had been little progress so far, in the GoF view.

CAUTION ON KHADDAM

15. (C) Revisiting recent public statements by former Khaddam, Boche described the GoF as taken aback by Khaddam's self-assurance and the fact that he had raised the level of his investive to the point of open revolt against the SARG. Boche noted bullish comments by Khaddam to "Al Hayat" and other Arab dailies, to the effect that the Syrian regime would fall in a few weeks. Boche concluded that although Khaddam's statements were a major boost to UNIIIC, they had put the GoF in a difficult position, as many had wrongly concluded that he was being manipulated by France. (GoF officials continue to deny any contact with Khaddam, and the MFA told us they are investigating his visa status.) Boche assessed that Khaddam is not an alternative to Bashar, as he was totally associated with the Hafez al-Asad regime and was directly responsible for all that had befallen the U.S. and France in Lebanon, including assassination of French nationals.

16. (C) Boche also expressed concern that Khaddam's Sunni status could prompt further solidarity among Alawites, or result in his being embraced by Arab governments looking for a Sunni to break the "Shi'a crescent" from Iran through southern Lebanon. Boche cited a Saudi-Sa'ad Hariri connection to Khaddam as evidence of the latter trend. He cited Khaddam's close ties to the late Rafik Hariri, who had helped Khaddam's sons in business in Saudi Arabia and helped the former Syrian VP build his fortune. (Note: Other Lebanese media contacts have offered more forward-leaning speculation that Khaddam is being backed by the Saudi government, at the instigation of Sa'ad Hariri. One of our best-informed Lebanese journalist contacts told us he viewed it as inconceivable that the original December 30 Khaddam interview was not approved at the highest levels of the Saudi government, given that "Al Arabiya" is essentially an official Saudi channel. The same journalist told us that three weeks prior to the "Al Arabiya" interview, Khaddam sought an interview with "Al Hayat" to make similar statements, but was turned down, due to trepidation on the part of the paper's Saudi owner. End note.)

AND CAUTION ON LAHOUD

17. (C) Boche voiced caution when asked about prospects for supporting a Lebanese-driven process to replace President Lahoud. While conceding that the issue had come to the forefront again in Lebanon, Boche said the GoF understood that Lahoud would not step down without a promise of immunity -- a non-starter for the GoF, as it would be contrary to the spirit of the UNIIIC investigation to give a potentially guilty party immunity. Boche noted that Lahoud is not in the clear, and that Khaddam's statements had raised scrutiny on Lahoud's involvement in the Hariri assassination. Boche concluded that the U.S. and France should discuss the issue further during the Gourdault-Montagne visit.

GOL CABINET STANDOFF, POSSIBLE 1559 COMPROMISE WITH HIZBALLAH

18. (C) Boche echoed U.S. concerns on a possible Sa'ad Hariri-brokered compromise with Shi'a parties allowing for Hizballah to remain exempt from UNSCR 1559. Boche described Sa'ad as "too sensitive" to Hizballah's influence, and not sufficiently cognizant of the need to ally with Christians. Boche opined that Sa'ad had inherited from his late father the tendency to look excessively to Hizballah for support. At the same time, Boche reiterated that the GOL had not accepted Hizballah's terms, and expressed hope that progress would be made during Sa'ad's meetings with PM Siniora and other GOL officials on the margins of the Hajj in Saudi Arabia. The GoF would continue to urge the GOL to "keep the bar high" on letting Hizballah back into the government. Since Hizballah had not walked away completely, it was clear that it wanted to keep its ministers in the government, and the ruling majority had the ability to stay firm on the

terms. That said, Boche added that the GoF would discourage a rupture between the majority and Hizballah/Amal. In Boche's view, the GOL would lose legitimacy without a Shi'a component. The GoF would continue to advocate resolution of the cabinet standoff, based on a firm negotiating position by the majority coalition.

COMMENT

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19. (C) Despite the positive momentum generated by the Khaddam remarks, our GoF contacts are not in an overly optimistic or triumphalist mood on efforts to sustain pressure on Damascus. We consider Boche a straight-shooter who offers Gof positions without sugar-coating, and view his emphasis on the need for U.S.-GoF continued dialogue as constructive, despite the pessimism contained in many of his conclusions. End comment.

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Hofmann